

Saga Of The Handcart Pioneers

By FRED HARVEY

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"True West's" Editor's Note: Many tales have been told about the hardships of brave pioneers who migrated westward over burning plains and icy mountains. Our nomination for the greatest migration of them all was undertaken under extremely adverse conditions by about 5,000 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

IN 1856, Church President Brigham Young was anxious to build the population of Deseret. He was even more concerned about keeping the Mormon promise of asylum in "Zion" to European members of the denomination. Money was a problem—funds of the Perpetual Emigrating Fund Company were running low and Salt Lake City coffers were depleted by the crickets' invasion of crops.

President Young had devised a plan whereby emigrants could sail to America, make their way to Iowa City and there each family would be assigned a handcart in which to carry its belongings. The 1,400 miles to Salt Lake City would be traversed by foot.

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Mormons in England, Scotland, Wales and Scandinavia were enthusiastic; about 1,300 families signed up for the plan in Liverpool. Had they been able to foresee the tragic struggle ahead, many of them would have stayed where they were.

The city-bred Saints, used to the grey skies of northern Europe, faced hazards never dreamed of in the populous region of their homelands—burning desert heat, blinding snow storms, hunger and thirst—as they trudged across arid plains and waded ice-encrusted rivers and streams.

FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN, single men and women and old folks arrived at the terminus at Iowa City, and were set to work building strong two-wheel handcarts from native oak and hickory. To make the wheels last longer they were bound with iron rims.

The carts were just large enough to hold a few cooking utensils, supplies and a minimum of personal belongings. Each adult was allowed 17 pounds for his possessions and each child, 10. Four to five persons were assigned to each cart. Ox-drawn wagons carried extra supplies. A small herd of milk cows followed.

Five handcart companies, numbering around 3,000 people and pulling 662 carts, crossed that year. **THE FIRST** company left June 9, the second on June 11, and the third, three weeks later. In spite of hardships and many deaths, the Saints arrived in fairly good condition at Emigration Canyon, overlooking Salt Lake City, where they were welcomed by the entire population.

Members of the fourth and fifth companies did not leave Europe until May. By the time they arrived in Iowa City, there wasn't enough seasoned lumber for handcarts, so they made them from green wood. This made the carts heavier than usual.

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On July 26, 576 followed. Although July was late in the year for such a journey the Mormons believed they would run out of food



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tioned, "It's a long way and late in the season."

The majority were for going through, and the majority ruled.

Each mile seemed longer now. They trudged across Nebraska country in tortuous heat. Boots worn beyond repair, feet swollen and blistered, they struggled valiantly across the savage prairie. Children cried to ride the wagons. Old folks were lagging, but no complaints came from their lips. They closed their eyes to failure and went on, hoping and praying for the strength to keep on.

THE MORMONS continued to sing their hymns, but for some the spontaneity was gone. Others still had faith; the Lord would see them through. One of their favorite songs was the handcart hymn:

*For some must push and some must pull
As we go marching up the hill,
As merrily on the way we go
Until we reach the valley,
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nerve-wracking. Could they endure more? Was the struggle worth it? Sickness and death were becoming common.

At the end of almost every day, coffins were made for children and the frail ones. The emigrants were plagued by "the American disease," which may have been some form of dysentery. Their morale was hitting bottom and there were still hundreds of miles to go. All they could see was raw plains, loneliness and desolation.

It seemed impossible, yet each hour found the Saints nearer their goal. They dragged their weary bodies on. The will to live was great, but how much could they stand? There was more soul-stirring and tragic drama yet to be staged.

Chimney Rock, Scott's Bluff came into view. Days later, they crossed the North Platte River. In the shimmering distance lay Fort Laramie. It was Oct. 8.

They still had some 500 miles to go, the most hazardous yet. There were cold, high mountains

the allotment. The trail became tougher. The forced marches were harder to bear. The handcarts crept at a snail's pace.

Gone were the laughter and hearty songs. Some occasionally intoned hymns to summon lost spirit. They were watched by sunken eyes staring vacantly from gaunt, pinched faces. Exhausted in mind and body they pushed ahead mechanically.

When one man fell, others lifted him painfully to his feet. No smile of thanks lighted his face; no sign of recognition, yet they all understood. They might be the next to fall—or die.

As strength ebbed, many had to throw away belongings to lighten their load. Now with cold weather and snow falling, the Saints realized their costly mistake. Raw, biting winds blew icy blasts. With heads bent against the freezing winds, they staggered on. Westward—ever westward.

One day, the emigrants awoke to a foot of snow and had to break new trails. The going was slow, painful—shocking to their numbed minds. They stopped and camped at a patch of willows. The next morning fresh snow covered the entire countryside. Some of their animals had drifted from camp, but the Saints were too exhausted to look for them.

DEATH HOVERED over the determined pioneers now like an ominous cloud. Each day's dead were wrapped in blankets and consigned to a common grave with the prayers of the survivors.

At times the ground was too frozen for digging. The men buried their dead in snowdrifts.

One woman found her husband dead beside her in the night. She didn't cry; she was already past tears. She lay beside him all through the icy night, staring dry-eyed in the darkness. In the morning, she turned what little energies she had toward the care of her three children.

Captain Martin and a volunteer finally rode out ahead to find help. The migrants prayed with them before they left. They would get through; God willing.

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President Young said, "My home and all I have will be open to our new brothers and sisters. I know that your hearts and homes will be ready to take them in when they arrive."

It was a 400-mile journey to the surviving emigrants. The weather grew worse. Time was short. The rescuers pushed their teams.

At Fort Bridger they stopped. A cold, raging blizzard from the north struck them. While they were there, Captain Martin and his partner rode into the fort on two exhausted animals.

"You've got to get through at once," the captain said. "If you don't, it will be too late."

They left immediately. Meanwhile, many more of the heroic Saints were dying. When the rescue party found them, they hadn't eaten for two days. Only about 400 of the 576 who departed from Iowa City were left. Many of the young men cried when they saw the condition of these people. There wasn't sufficient clothing to go around, but at least they could provide food.

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would be assigned a handcart in which to carry its belongings. The 1,000 miles to Salt Lake City would be traversed by foot.

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The fifth company marched across Iowa, singing happy Mormon hymns. They woke, slept and ate under the semi-strict regulations of their leader, Captain Martin. A bugle called them in the early dawn. Breakfast was cooked over hurriedly built fires, and the day's walk began.

THE SAINTS FOLLOWED the trail blazed by Brigham Young 10 years earlier. The hot summer sun beat down upon them. Dry, hot choking dust swirled up constantly. Mosquitoes swarmed about their heads. For the first few days, the children thought it was fun to run out and pick the gaily-colored flowers. After a week of dreary trudging, they tired of this game.

Crossing the Chariton River, they were caught in a downpour of rain. Wagons and carts cut deeply into the mud. The Saints pried, pushed and pulled. On reaching high ground, they halted for a well-earned breathing spell. So far things were going well for them.

Before crossing the Missouri the emigrants stopped to repair their warped carts. A debate in camp arose . . . should they stay or continue? Captain Martin thought they should stay over until spring. "Play it safe," he cau-



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They crossed the Elkhorn, the North Loop, the South Loop. Food was becoming a serious item. One night a herd of stampeding buffalo came through their camp. When they awoke, many of their animals were gone. To make matters worse, they had to unload the wagons and put whatever supplies they could salvage on their weakened green handcarts.

WESTWARD AGAIN. The extra heavy pulling was a severe strain. It was tiresome, hard,

nerve-racking. Could they endure more? Was the struggle worth it? Sickness and death were becoming common.

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AT FORT LARAMIE, the Saints traded personal possessions for buffalo robes and bedding. When they left the fort, rations were cut. Pioneers passing them on their way east commented on the Mormon's ragged appearance and predicted they'd never survive.

To make the food supply last, rations were cut again. Three-quarters of a pound of flour was

at a pinch at times. The next morning fresh snow covered the entire countryside. Some of their animals had drifted from the trail but the Saints were too exhausted to look for them.

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Some of the emigrants climbed onto the wagons of their rescuers for the remainder of the pilgrimage. Many kept doggedly dragging or shoving their carts as though their wooden Jonahs had become part of themselves.

MEMBERS OF THE FIFTH Company began reaching Salt Lake City Nov. 9, with stragglers arriving for several days. Crowds of Mormons met them and took them to their homes.

A spirited young Scotswoman, Margaret Dalglish, pulled her possessions to the very rim of Salt Lake Valley. She looked down at this place she had almost never hoped to reach—at signs of people strengthened by food and shelter. Then she looked back at the pitiful belongings in her handcart. Suddenly, she shoved the cart over the edge of the ravine, and watched it roll and tumble until it crashed at the bottom of the canyon.

When Brigham Young found that the fourth company had lost more than 80 persons, and the fifth, about one-fourth of its company, he ruled that no more handcarts would start as late as July.

HANDCART EXPEDITIONS continued until 1860, and then stopped for all time. On beautiful Temple Square in Salt Lake City there is a statue of a family pulling a cart.

It is a symbol of the spirit that conquered the West.

Triumph and Tragedy

Hand Carts across The Plains

by Gustive O. Larson

History Department, Brigham Young University

THE MORMON handcart episode of a century ago was unique, both as a success story and as a tragedy. It demonstrated the feasibility of handcart transportation on the Oregon Trail and revealed the cohesive strength of the converts. Many converts were being helped to escape from Europe to Zion through the services of the Perpetual Emigrating Fund Company. But advancing costs were defeating its efforts leaving thousands more clamoring for release. The Handcart Plan evolved to provide increased opportunity for emigration through cutting transportation costs. Brigham Young wrote in 1855 "I have been thinking how we should operate another year. We cannot afford to purchase wagons and teams as in times past. I am consequently thrown back upon my old plan—to make handcarts and let the emigration foot it and draw upon them the necessary supplies having a cow or two for every ten."

FIVE companies sailed from Liverpool in the Spring of 1856—the last two belatedly in May. Altogether they included nearly two thousand Mormon converts. After tossing six to eight weeks on the Atlantic they disembarked at Boston to entrain for the western railway terminal at Iowa City. Beyond this point lay nearly 3,000 rugged miles to be covered on foot with handcarts. The first three hundred miles were through settled Iowa which afforded opportunity for the novices to acquaint themselves to the environment and method of travel. Their final jumping off place was Florence, Nebraska, (formerly Mormon Winter Quarters) beyond which stretched the wilderness.

Placed against the terrain, climate, and distance was a conglomeration of urban factory workers, colliers, etc. more ready for the Kingdom than adjust in body.

The first two groups led by Edmund Elsworth and Daniel McArthur included 486 English and Welshmen,

women and children. They were followed by a smaller company of Welshmen led by Edward Bunker. They arrived at Florence, sunburned and dusty, early in July and after ten days of rest and repairs stretched their line of one hundred handcarts westward on July 20. Five missionary wagons drawn by three span of oxen each trailed behind. The last two companies composed of 404 and 576 English, Welsh and Scandinavians were led by James G. Willie and Edward Martin respectively. Having

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been delayed in sailing from England they were still anxiously waiting departure from Iowa City when their more fortunate brethren pulled away from Florence.

The hand carts were of simple wood construction. The box was usually of Iowa hickory or oak with shafts of the same material but the axle was uniformly of hickory. One who used them wrote: "In length the side pieces and shafts were about six or seven feet, with three or four binding cross bars from back part to the forepart of the body of the cart. Then two or three feet space from the latter bar to the front bar or singletree for the lead horse or lead man, woman or boy of the team. . . . Across the bars of the bed of the cart we usually sewed a piece of bed ticking or counterpane. On this wooden cart . . . we often loaded 400 to 500 pounds of flour, bedding, extra clothing, cooking utensils, and a tent."

THE FIRST three companies justified Brigham Young's position that hand carts could outstrip wagon trains on the trail. If there were hardships, sickness and death en route there were no more casualties than generally experienced in westward migration.

When they arrived in Salt Lake Valley on September

20, they were met at the mouth of Emigration Canyon by Brigham Young and other officials with military and band escort. After introductions and greetings, "The line of march was scarcely taken up before it began to be met by men, women and children, on foot, on horses, and in wagons, thronging out to see and welcome the first hand cart companies, and the numbers rapidly increased until the living tide lined and thronged South Temple Street." An eyewitness wrote, "As they came down the bench you could scarcely see them for dust. When they entered the city the folks came running from every quarter to get a glimpse of the long-looked for hand carts. I will never forget the feeling that ran through my whole system as I caught the first sight of them. . . . The tears ran down the cheeks of many a man who you would have thought would not, could not, shed a tear."

The safe arrival, in record time, of three hand cart companies was regarded as complete vindication of the plan. "This is considered a great triumph in our immigration, as by this means we assist many thousands more annually to gather home to Zion with the same amount of means as heretofore, and now it is demonstrated that it can be done."

WHILE these celebrations of victory were being observed in Salt Lake the last two hand cart companies of the season were running into trouble. Delayed for repairs at Flor-

ence, the Willie and Martin companies did not leave until the 18 and 27 of August. A meeting had been held to consider the remaining distance of one thousand miles against the prospects of open weather. The one voice of warning which was raised was drowned by a rousing vote to go forward.

Thus reassured, the Willie companying covered half the remaining distance to arrive at Fort Laramie on Oct. 1. Expected supplies were not awaiting them. Five hundred miles still separated them from Zion and the Martin Company was still farther behind. Disappointed, they pressed forward on diminishing food rations until October snows pinned them down—the Willie company at Loupe Fork on the Sweetwater and Martin at Platte Bridge.

Already, Emigration officers and the first companies had arrived in Salt Lake Valley to urge assistance to those in the rear. Supply wagons were on their way. But when news of the seriousness of the situation arrived Brigham Young rose in the October Conference of the Church to announce gravely, "My subject is this: on this fifth day of October, 1856, many of our brethren and sisters are on the plains with hand carts, and probably are now 700 miles from this place; we must send them assistance. The text will be "To get them here." This is the salvation I am now seeking for, to save our brethren."

Pioneer families recounted their scanty stores and a relief train set out at once with their sacrifice. Before

the month was out no less than 250 teams were defying winter snows in the mountain passes to relieve the sufferers. Among the first and the best equipped were those sent by Brigham Young and members of his council.

THE RESCUE of the hand cart pioneers was only partial and two hundred remained in the frozen ground to mark the scenes of tragedy. But those who reached the valley long remembered the first warmth of the Kingdom which had led them like a loadstone out of their foreign lands. News of their arrival came during a Sunday morning service. Brigham Young dismissed the congregation with this classic declaration.

"When those persons arrive I do not want to see them put into houses by themselves. I want to have them distributed in this city among the families that have good, comfortable houses; and I wish the sisters now before me, and all who know how and can, to nurse and wait upon the newcomers, and prudently administer medicine and food to them. . . . The afternoon meeting will be omitted, for I wish the sisters to go home and prepare to give those who have just arrived a mouthful of something to eat and to wash them and nurse them up. . . . Prayer is good, but when (as on this occasion) baked potatoes and pudding and milk are needed, prayer will not supply their place. Give every duty its proper time and place."

